

An Evaluation of *A Trail to Every Classroom* Summer Institute 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Trail to Every Classroom (TTEC) project is a collaborative effort between the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the National Park Service. These partners seek to promote student understanding of and appreciation for the Appalachian Trail (AT), public lands, and natural and cultural resources as assets within their communities from Georgia to Maine. The Forest for Every Classroom (FFEC) program in Vermont serves as the model for this pilot initiative. The TTEC Summer Institute consisted of one week of training in the principles and practices of place-based education and service learning along the AT. TTEC hopes to increase the availability of grants available to schools and build capacity to sustain service-learning activities and partnerships into the future.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation of the institute was conducted by external evaluators from PEER Associates, Inc. PEER Associates uses a multiple-methods, utilization-focused, participatory evaluation process. The Summer Institute evaluation consisted of two days of observations, 8 focus groups (representing 70% of the participants), and 28 surveys (representing 70% of the participants). All data was systematically analyzed into emergent themes, a summary of which is presented below.

Summary of Key Evaluation Findings

- Overall, the institute was a positive experience for educators and a successful first step in the FFEC replication process.
- The institute provided a networking opportunity that offered a diversity of knowledge, skills, and experiences for educators to draw upon during curriculum planning.
- The institute increased educators' confidence and preparation to integrate place-based education and service learning activities into their curricula.



- Most educators successfully developed written curriculum or implementation plans for the upcoming school year, though they may have benefitted from more guidance and time in the planning process.
- As a result of the institute, educators began to value the Appalachian Trail more highly as a community asset and educational tool.
- The institute provided a coherent frame for theories of place-based education and service learning.
- The institute was delivered in a comfortable, flexible environment with outstanding facilities, which helped to create an atmosphere of respect, humor, and shared enthusiasm that was vital to the institute's success.

Recommendations & Conclusions

TTEC program partners should consider offering ongoing professional development in place-based education and service-learning techniques. Specifically, participants need ongoing support from partner organizations in order to implement larger-scale TTEC projects, including:

- Repeated networking and follow-up opportunities
- Direct outreach to school administrators
- Website and other technical support
- Funding for transportation, materials, and teacher release time.

"This has been twice as good as any other course or in-service experience that I've had in the education area!"

– Teacher participant

"Before I came, I thought of [the AT] as a very individual thing. I might go out and hike on it, and I thought of it as for 'me.' Now it's something that I can't wait to go out and share with the kids, with the community. I want other people to see what a great resource it is." – Teacher participant



This report was authored by PEER Associates, Inc. A more complete description of the evaluation personnel involved in this project can be found in the Appendices of this report or at www.PEECworks.org. Evaluation Co-Directors for PEER Associates Amy Powers and Michael Duffin can be contacted at amy@PEERassociates.net or michael@PEERassociates.net.